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THE RAPTORES OF NELSON COUNTY, KENTUCKY BEN J. BLINCOE

The following is a brief account of the birds of prey of Nelson county, Kentucky. Nelson county is situated in the central part of the state and today is largely under a high state of cultivation. Timber is growing scarcer each year. So little has been published on the birds of this state that some information on the hawks and owls of this locality might be of use to those interested in the bird-life of this region. The list comprises eighteen species but only eight or nine of these can be called common. They have been observed mainly in the country within two or three miles of Bardstown, which is the county-seat. No doubt a series of observations in some of the wilder parts of the county would reveal a fuller knowledge of several of the species listed and perhaps would add a species or two to the list.

In 1885 Mr. Charles W. Beckham published a list of birds of Nelson county. His valuable list as he himself remarks is very incomplete in regard to the birds of prey, being unable to secure specimens for identification. It has been my good fortune to examine in hand specimens of every species listed with the exception of the Black Vulture and the Great Horned Owl. The former is readily identified in life by its form, manner of flight, etc., and the latter was noted by Mr. Beckham. So far as I am able to find in the few publications dealing with Kentucky birds of prey, there are but two species other than the ones

listed here, that have been observed in the state. These are the Pigeon Hawk and Swallow-tailed Kite (Prof. H. Garman, Vertebrate Animals of Kentucky).

Here as elsewhere the birds of prey, especially the hawks, are severely persecuted by farmer and sportsman and it is almost useless to try to uproot the ill-feeling toward all hawk-kind. The larger owls are generally looked upon as chicken thieves and are killed for that reason. The little screech owl is usually allowed to pursue its career unmolested but there are those who contend that it should be destroyed.

It is with the confidence that this list will be of interest to those interested in the hawks and owls of Kentucky that it is presented for publication.

1. *Cathartes aura septentrionalis*—Turkey Vulture.

A common resident, but is often scarce in winter. Not so abundant as a few years ago. Within the last four or five years much complaint has been made about the buzzards spreading various live-stock diseases.

2. *Catharista urubu*—Black Vulture.

A rather uncommon resident. Mr. Beckham found it only as a summer resident. I have observed it in every month of the year and very often in winter. Usually seen in threes or fours and seldom associates with the common species. It is occasionally attacked by crows in the same manner as some of the larger hawks.

3. *Circus hudsonius*—Marsh Hawk.

A fairly common migrant, especially in the fall. Occasionally seen in mid-winter. Most often observed late in the afternoon skimming low over the fields, at which times it is readily identified by its peculiar flight and white rump. On dissecting one of these birds its stomach was found to contain the remains of a mouse. The large appearance of this bird has led many country folk to consider it as a great enemy to poultry. Mr. Beckham did not observe it here.

4. *Accipiter velox*—Sharp-shinned Hawk.

A fairly common resident. Found breeding in a small beechwood about two miles southeast of Bardstown. It is more numerous in the fall, at which times it is very destructive to song birds. Have several times seen it chase English sparrows, and it occasionally visits the outskirts of Bardstown, likely in search of these pests.

5. *Accipiter cooperi*—Cooper's Hawk.

Resident. Not as common and never as abundant as *velox*. Found nesting in 1917. The worst hawk enemy of poultry. On one occasion I saw this hawk dash into a small flock of English sparrows and capture one before they could fly from the tree. Was observed by Mr. Beckham.

6. *Accipiter atricapillas atricapillas*—Goshawk.

A rare winter visitor. A fine mature specimen of this hawk was taken near Bardstown on December 1, 1917. Its occurrence here at that time seemed to be a forwarning of the severe winter weather that prevailed for many weeks. Was not observed by Mr. Beckham, but was observed in the state by Audubon.

7. *Buteo borealis borealis*—Red-tailed Hawk.

Resident. Rather rare breeder. Fairly common in fall and winter. For several years a pair of these birds nested in the woods along the bluffs bordering the Beechfork river, about three miles southeast of Bardstown. This is the hawk that is generally supposed to be the worst "chicken hawk." I have trapped it by placing a steel trap near the carcass of a hen. It is just such carrion that the redtail seeks in cold weather. Mr. Beckham does not mention it.

8. *Buteo lineatus lineatus*—Red-shouldered Hawk.

Resident. Have never found its nest, but feel sure it breeds, having observed it at all seasons of the year. Observed one chasing a rabbit in the month of August. Mr. Beckham found it breeding and stated that it was probably the most common hawk found here.

9. *Haliaeetus leucocephalus leucocephalus*—Bald Eagle.

A rare visitor. An immature specimen was taken about ten years ago near Nazareth Academy. Mr. Beckham mentions one taken near Boston in the county.

10. *Falco sparverius sparverius*—Sparrow Hawk.

Resident. Our most common hawk. It is not uncommon about the outskirts of Bardstown, but is more often observed in the farming districts. A telephone pole is its favorite lookout point. Often observed about the cornshocks, at gathering time, in search of mice. In severe weather it often takes shelter in outbuildings.

11. *Pandion haliaetus carolinensis*—Osprey.

A migrant. Have observed two specimens. One taken on May 25, 1917, the other October 18, 1919. Mr. Beckham mentions an osprey taken in April, 1882.

12. *Aluco pratincola*—Barn Owl.

This owl occurs rarely and I have been informed of its breeding near Bloomfield, in the county. It is not generally known in

this locality, but occasionally I hear mention of a "monkey-faced" owl. One of these birds, taken in August, 1914, had last fed on several large night-flying beetles. Mr. Beckham makes note of a specimen taken in an adjoining county.

13. *Asio wilsonianus*—Long-eared Owl.

Have two records: February 16, 1914, specimen collected; March 7, 1917, specimen observed. They were both located in the same cedar thicket about two miles southeast of Bardstown. On examination of the stomach of the bird collected it was found to contain the remains of a cardinal and a small native sparrow. At its roost was found the remains of birds and mice. This owl was not observed by Mr. Beckham.

14. *Asio flammeus*—Short-eared Owl.

Two specimens: November 15, 1915, and another specimen about ten days later. Both had fed on mice and nothing else. Mr. Beckham states that one was taken here in November, 1881.

15. *Strix varia varia*—Barred Owl.

This seems to be a rather uncommon owl locally. It was not observed by Mr. Beckham. I have observed it twice, March 7, 1915, and November 22, 1919. The first specimen was likely a breeding bird.

16. *Otus asio asio*—Screech Owl.

A common resident. The most common owl, and with the exception of the turkey vulture, is likely the most abundant and raptorial in this locality. In July the young are frequently seen huddled together in shaded thickets. Common in Bardstown as well as in the surrounding country.

17. *Bubo virginianus virginianus*—Great Horned Owl.

Mr. Beckham states that this is "a rather common summer resident." I have never seen a specimen of this owl, but from the various accounts of hunters and farmers I feel that perhaps a few of them still inhabit some of the more wooded districts of the county.

18. *Nyctca nyctca*—Snowy Owl.

This arctic species has occurred here at least three times. Alexander Wilson observed a few specimens near Bardstown about the year 1810. Mr. Beckham mentions a specimen taken in the 70s or 80s. I had occasion to observe a fine, nearly white, specimen taken about fifteen years ago.

December 21, 1919.